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Christian fundamentalism in Latin America

# In Latin America, campaigns for religious freedom are usually the opposite

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**Whenever there is a campaign upholding freedom of religion in a Western country, or each time there is a bill that aims to promote or defend religious liberty, I start trembling. Is it really necessary to champion freedom of religion in those countries where such freedom is already guaranteed? It seems that under the guise of standing up for religious freedom, these projects try to impose upon us a conservative interpretation of Christianity. This runs counter to any real freedom of beliefs, which is an essential aspect of human rights.**

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## Argentina

Last year, the Argentine government submitted a bill to protect freedom of religion. Although the Constitution states that “the Federal Government supports the Roman Catholic Apostolic religion”, actually each citizen in Argentina has the liberty to practice any religion they wish. Argentine citizens even have the right not to practice any religion at all. Nevertheless, the bill seeks to create a legal multi-religious state rather than a secular one which protects freedom of beliefs. And still leaves Catholicism with a higher status.

What is the (not so) hidden intention behind this action? It is a clear attempt to impose conservative ideology – traditional values – on a diverse society, rather than protect true freedom of belief.

Which are those values the Argentine government, allied with some religious organizations advocate for? They fight for a unique family model and for an exclusive heterosexual way of life; hence they continuously fight to suppress LGBT persons’ rights. They speak out against comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) as THE decline of culture, and fight to avoid CSE at schools. They have a strong opposition to sexual and reproductive rights, i.e. access to contraceptive methods -including emergency contraception-, the right to choose when to become pregnant, and reproductive health counseling for adolescents. These groups also oppose artificial reproductive technologies and the legalization of same-sex marriage, let alone child adoption by same-sex couples.

Paradoxically, Argentina has advanced laws that guarantee and respect sexual orientation and

gender identity. The country has a law recognizing same-sex marriages. And its Gender Identity Law is an example to the World.

One of the central issues the Argentine bill considers is conscientious objection. Under this umbrella, the proposed articles not only misinterpret the meaning of this right (an objection on moral or religious grounds related to military issues, such as serving in the armed forces or bearing arms), but also use it to block human rights. The bill encourages people to declare themselves conscientious objectors when a practice or a service clashes with their beliefs. Everyone, including civil servants, can exercise this right. This consideration clearly reverses the meaning of conscientious objection: instead of being a protection against State obligations, it turns to be a legal protection provided by the State to discriminate in the provision of a public service.

Thus, having been declared conscientious objectors, health staff (ordinance workers included) would be able to deny patients contraceptive methods and legal abortions. As objectors, health staff could also deny patients their rights to undergo gender affirming procedures (surgery and hormones). Conscientious objection would also allow teachers to dismiss comprehensive sexuality education, or to have bureaucrats that can reject marrying same sex couples. The list of human rights violations can become broader.

Many Argentine organizations, scholars and religious leaders have criticized the bill, unveiling what the alleged freedom of religion hides. From Amnesty International Argentina, to the Federación Argentina de Lesbianas, Gays, Bisexuales y Trans (Argentine Federation of LGBT people), alongside other NGOs and academics, there is agreement that if this bill becomes law, it will cut off human rights.

## Brazil

What is worrying is that the Argentine bill is not an isolated attempt. We already have some examples of how other conservative religious groups are working in Latin America. While being in Brazil organizing a conference on “The ends of democracy”, philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler faced a protest against her. Far-right Christian groups called her a “witch” and accused her of trying to undercut the values of the country and destroy people’s gender identities.[1] All this was accompanied by a mis-en-scene where Butler was burned in effigy.

After these protests, Butler discussed what had happened: “My sense is that the group who engaged this frenzy of effigy burning, stalking and harassment want to defend ‘Brazil’ as a place where LGBTQ people are not welcome, where the family remains heterosexual (so no gay marriage), where abortion is illegal and reproductive freedom does not exist. They want boys to be boys, and girls to be girls, and for there to be no complexity in questions such as these. The effort is antifeminist, antitrans, homophobic and nationalist, using social media to stage and disseminate their events. In this way, they resemble the forms of neo-fascism that we see emerging in different parts of the world. Indeed, they reminded us at the conference why we were right to worry about the state of democracy.” [2]

As protesters explained, “We are not here because of the theme of the conference; we are here because Judith Butler is one of the proponents of gender theory, one of the originators and one of the main proponents of this thing. [Our presence] is not against homosexuals, or against a man who wants to dress up as woman. It’s against an ideology that is being preached to children, trying to say that even though you are born a man or a woman, you can have a different gender. It’s absurd.” [3]

## **Paraguay**

In another example, the Paraguayan government has recently forbidden teaching “gender ideology” at schools, after Catholic and Evangelist leaders asked the Education ministry to prohibit contents such as gender equality.[4] The prohibition is based on the protection of “the” family as the one built only by a man and a woman. This has happened in a conservative political context, where a congressman has openly declared himself anti-LGBTI, and others in power are trying to impose conservative values –i.e. anti-choice or prolife, the only family model they believe in, women’s rights– upon the whole society. It’s worth recalling that the current President Horacio Cartes said during his presidential campaign in 2013, that he would “shoot himself in his testicles if he had a homosexual son”.

## **Peru**

Peru also exhibits a similar situation regarding “gender ideology”. In 2017 there was a strong campaign which aimed to withdraw concepts such as gender identity or gender construction from basic school curriculum. The campaign included a legal action by Padres en Acción, an organization with close relations to conservative Catholic and Evangelical sectors that promote “education according to Christian values”. As a result, while the legal process hasn’t yet come to an end, the Ministry of Education decided that the previous curriculum was the valid one, despite the fact that, as they explained, gender will be considered in some primary schools as “equal rights and opportunities for men and women”. The government’s decision has been preceded by an intensive campaign called #ConMisHijosNoTeMetas (Not with my children) launched by these conservative groups.

## **Colombia**

In Colombia, the peace agreement between the government and the rebels (FARC), which brought the long standing civil war to an end, was annulled after a 2016 plebiscite. A great number of “no” voters were Evangelists. Part of their arguments for voting “no” referred to the menace they believe those agreements posed for the traditional family. Peace agreements had a gender perspective all along its text, and acknowledged sexual orientation and gender identity as characteristics to be taken into account when implementing damage reparations. The agreements mentioned LGBTI communities –alongside women, indigenous, Afro-descendants, and others-, as communities that had been specially affected by Colombian war.[5]

These fundamentalists attempts to derail sexual and reproductive rights may be related with the weakening of some Latin-American democracies, and/or the arrival of neoliberal governments to power. Argentina is ruled by a neoliberal government which prefers to be aligned with The International Monetary Fund policies, even at the cost of violating the human rights of its people. Brazil suffered an institutional coup d’état when Congress (made up by an important number of Evangelist members) dismissed former president Dilma Rousseff. The current president upholds a conservative agenda. Something similar happened some years ago in Paraguay, where ex-president Fernando Lugo was thrown out of office; since then, that country’s government has become more and more conservative.

Neoliberal governments are often elected with a strong support from conservative groups, among which fundamentalists and religious leaders, are key supporters. In political contexts where right-wing policies are developed (or imposed in a not so subtle way), LGBTI rights and women rights are

the bargaining chip.

Taking advantage of the fertile ground in Latin-America for their plans –and getting paid for their support to election winners- conservative groups are unfolding their insidious agendas. Using the garb of freedom or religion, they work to stop “gender ideology”, to block legal gender identity, to prevent comprehensive sexual education, and hinder access to contraception, let alone facilitate legal abortion.

The discourse of freedom of religion in Latin America has failed. It has become a tool to limit human rights. We need more true freedom and less moral imposition. We need to widen human rights exercise rather than limit self-decisions because of a moral imposition. Instead of promoting freedom of religion I prefer to stand up for freedom of conscience, a wider concept that encloses freedom of religion, and freedom of thought, which means also the possibility of not having any religion at all.

Freedom of religion is not under threat, as right wing propaganda argues. What is under threat if a unique vision of values prevails, is the diversity of thought, expression, sexuality, and identity. The key might be to continue to struggle for states to be secular and keep religions –all of them- away from public affairs.

**Mariana Winocur**

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[1] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/judith-butler-discusses-being-burned-effigy-and-protested-brazil>

[2] <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/judith-butler-discusses-being-burned-effigy-and-protested-brazil>

[3] <http://www.brazilusaneews.com/berkeleys-judith-butler-gets-tangled-brazils-culture-wars/>

[4] <http://www.cde.org.py/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Resoluci%C3%B3n-29.664-del-MEC-1-7.jpeg>

[5] [https://es.scribd.com/document/322147291/24-08-2016acuerdofinalfinalfinal-1472094587#fullscreen&from\\_embed](https://es.scribd.com/document/322147291/24-08-2016acuerdofinalfinalfinal-1472094587#fullscreen&from_embed)

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**P.S.**

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Source:

<http://arc-international.net/blog/freedom-of-religion-what-is-really-at-stake/>